Making the Nontraditional Traditional: Reimagining the College Campus with a Focus on Commuter Students

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Nontraditional students are often defined as those who are over the age of 25 (Wyatt, 2011). However, this definition ignores the variety of student characteristics that are considered generally atypical and not the expected norm of how a college student should look and act. In incorporating these characteristics, nontraditional students include those “who are older than typical college students, work because of financial necessity, belong to the first generation in their family to attend college, do not live on campus, attend part-time, or are members of minority racial groups” (Ogren, 2003, p. 640). Specifically in regards to students who do not live on campus, i.e. commuter students, their continued categorization as nontraditional is fascinating when one considers that “approximately seventy-five percent of college students are commuters” (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011). Thus, even though commuters vastly outnumber residential students, their experience is still viewed as not the “true” college experience.

To further exacerbate this issue, most colleges base their entire educational philosophy, policies, and services on the residential model – even institutions at which commuters are in the majority. Thus, commuter students’ needs are often not met and they internalize the marginality of their existence. To fundamentally alter this damaging situation, it is necessary to reimagine the college campus by viewing commuting as the “traditional” experience. Through reviewing the existing literature on commuter and nontraditional students, policy recommendations are proposed to help bring about this transformation.

**Residential Model of American Colleges.**

From the very beginning of the establishment of the higher education system in the United States, commuter students were not included as the target population (Jacoby, 1989; Likins, 1986). The American system is based on the residential college model of British institutions, most notably Oxford and Cambridge. The most prestigious American universities, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, all incorporate the residential philosophy into their educational mission (Jacoby, 1989). However, the residential view of college as both home and academic center does not reflect the actual experience of the vast majority of American college students who do not live on campus (Dugan, Garland, Jacoby & Gasiorski, 2008; Jacoby, 2000; Wilson, 2003). Furthermore, the stereotype of the typical college student as a White middle-class male, 18-22 years old, who lives on campus and attends college full time (with no outside family or work obligations), is an outdated myth (Pascarella, 2006). Since the end of World War II, there has been a continual increase in the number of veterans, older students (above the traditional college age of 18-22), students of color, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending college; these students are much more likely to commute to campus due to a variety of issues (Chickering, 1974; Jacoby, 1989), including family responsibilities, marital status, financial concerns, and employment.

**Treating Commuters as Resident Students.**

Despite the increase in numbers, colleges have not adapted their approach or services to address these changes (Likins, 1986). Dugan et al. (2008) note that colleges continue to utilize “programs and interventions designed for residential students with commuter student populations under the assumption that the effect on learning will be equivalent” (p. 283). The practice of ignoring or misunderstanding the unique needs of the commuter student “silent majority” (Wilson, 2003) is evident in a series of myths about commuters identified by Rhatigan (1986). These myths include the belief that commuters are “less committed to their education” (p. 4), “are less able academically” (p. 5), and “have no interest in the campus beyond their classes” (p. 5). Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support these claims, colleges continue to function under these assumptions (Dugan et al., 2008; Inman & Pascarella, 1997).

**Comparing Commuters to Resident Students.**

This lack of evidence is indicative of the overall dearth of research on commuter students (Dugan et al., 2008; Krause, 2007; Ortman, 1995). Most of the existing research is focused on comparing residential and commuter students (Banning & Hughes, 1986; Dugan et al., 2008; Jacoby, 1989). Chickering (1974) published the first major study of commuter students, *Commuting Versus Resident Students*, which has shaped and reinforced the misperceptions and negative stereotypes of commuters (Jacoby, 1989) and the myths identified by Rhatigan. Chickering’s view of commuters as “the have nots” and resident students as “the haves” (p. 49) on the basis of pre-college characteristics of lower socio-economic status, limited past achievements, and less educated parents supports the view that commuters are functioning at a deficit, instead of simply experiencing college from a unique and valid perspective (Jacoby, 1989). The entire explanation for the lower levels of commuter satisfaction, engagement, and academic success found in Chickering’s (1974) quantitative comparison of commuter and resident students is focused on the influence of pre-college student characteristics, and ignores the role of the institution in creating and perpetuating these trends (Banning & Hughes, 1986). In other words, commuter student disengagement is assumed to result from students’ disadvantaged backgrounds, instead of the institution’s failure to acknowledge and accommodate the unique needs of commuter students. Furthermore, Jacoby (1989) challenges the validity of Chickering’s findings on the basis that “in this work, the residential college experience is the benchmark against which all others should be measured. In it, the academic goals and developmental tasks of resident students remain unchallenged as the ‘correct’ ones” (p. 22). The commuter student experience is thus seen as non-normative and marginal.

**Fallacy of Assuming Commuter Population Homogeneity.**

Another problem is the tendency for the existing research on commuters to categorize them as a homogenous population (Dugan et al., 2008). Commuter students are actually a highly diverse group, with significant variations according to living situation, employment status, family obligations, educational goals, age, enrollment status (full time versus part time), and other factors (Rhatigan, 1986). The significance of this diversity is emphasized by Banning and Hughes (1986), who note that “commuting students represent the largest and most complex and diverse aggregation of students in higher education” (p. 23). Unfortunately, there are few studies that acknowledge the complexity of the commuter student population (Dugan et al., 2008). In one of these rare studies, Dugan et al. (2008) found significant differences between independent (living on their own) commuters and dependent (living with parents) commuters in relation to their leadership efficacy.

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